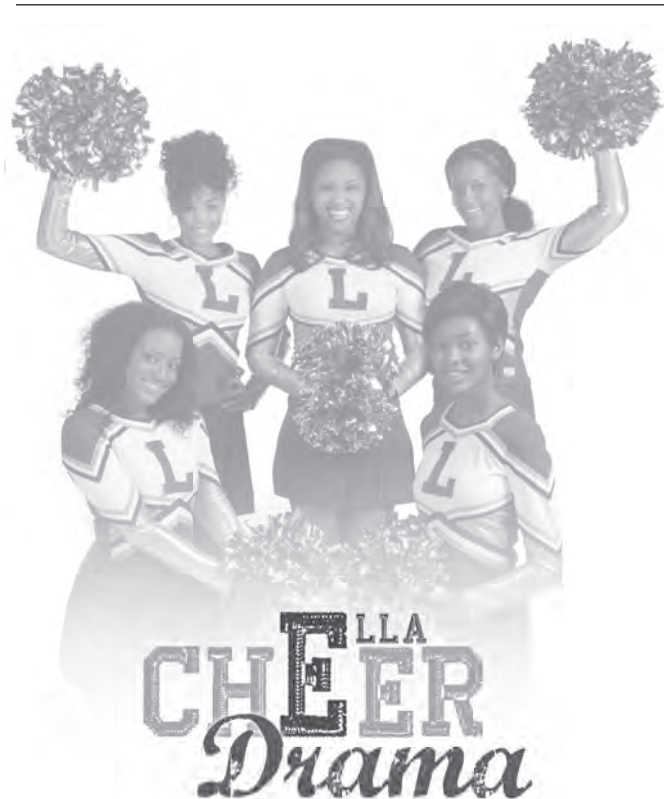




The Lockwood High cheer squad has it *all*—sass, looks, and all the right moves. But everything isn't always as perfect as it seems. Because where there's cheer, there's drama. And then there are the ballers—hot, tough, and on point. But what's going to win out—life's pressures or their NFL dreams?



Sweetheart Ella Blount will do anything
to keep her girls together ...
anything.

CHAPTER 1

Caught Up

Okay, Ella, so here's the deal. You've got to help us cheat," my sassy, overbearing twin sister, Eva, said to me. Randal stood by silently, as usual. "I know you're all sweet and innocent, but we're failing US History."

I squinted, and Randal said, "Don't look like that. I know it's bad that we're asking—"

"Whatever!" Eva cut in. "She's got a ninety-eight average in US History. You and I are flunking. We don't have time to study. We can do better on the next nine weeks. We need her to carry out our plan. Shoot, it ain't like I have never helped Ella out on stuff."

I wasn't sure what my sister thought I *owed* her for, but I would be risking a lot. They were both serious. I was in a sour-pickle mess.

"I don't even know how to cheat, y'all, even if I wanted to, okay? I can help you study for it though. Eva, you're right, I know the material pretty well. It is not too late for you to get it."

My sister looked at me like what I was saying was stupid. She had already stated her case, and I was just supposed to do what she said. We were identical twins, but we certainly were opposites. She was brash and sassy. I was patient and sweet.

It was not that I had a problem bending over backwards for her. What she was asking me to do could prove fatal for both of us. If we were caught, we could be suspended, and that meant being dropped from the cheer squad we both loved.

My problem with Eva was that she did not take responsibility for the predicaments she found herself in. Okay, so we did not have the perfect home life. Our father left us when we were five. We never got any specific reason, but looking back at the pictures, my mom used to be a brick house, sort of like Eva and me. We

had bodies that would make any guy's head turn. Eva liked to show hers off. I was more on the conservative side. My mom had put on some weight. I did not want to think my dad was that shallow, but looking at pictures of his new woman, who was skinnier than a stick, I could come to no other conclusion.

Eva loved playing the "poor me" card because our dad was not present in our lives. Now he had another family he called his own, and he was about to get married in a few weeks. He had a three-year-old son and another baby boy was on the way. Since she did not get the love from my dad, she gave it up to almost every guy who gave her attention. I was not calling my sister a garden tool, but if she ever got married, she certainly would be the last person wearing a white gown.

"Don't say no," Randal said. (But I was definitely going to tell them to forget it.) "Just go think about it."

There were five of us who were tighter than tight. Our crew consisted of Charli, Hallie, Randal, Eva, and me. We were all cheerleaders on the varsity football and competition squad. We

would be cheering basketball too. Our main goal was to make it to state and win the title of best cheerleaders in Class 5A.

We had just come from winning a football game. We were having a sleepover at Charli Black's house so that we'd all pump each other up for our first big cheer competition the next morning. Charli was our captain and an extremely savvy cheerleader. She had the looks, the personality, the charm, and the skills. Her father was a big-time judge. We loved coming over to the Black's house because Charli had her own wing, and there were no siblings to bother us when we gathered together since she was an only child.

Charli was with Hallie in the kitchen making us snacks. As outgoing as Charli was, Hallie was even more boisterous. Ever since I had known her, she had always been so positive. She had come through a lot and was raised by her father because her mother left them when she turned into a crackhead. Charli's life was not as glamorous as we all thought, however. Her parents were trying to reconnect again. Her dad had been caught tipping out. Charli and Hallie

had been hanging out together all night. They were both in love. They were both dating football players. Most ballers were jerks, but the two they had were sweetie pies.

“So what’s there to think about, Ella?” my sister asked with attitude.

I said, “Well, I just can’t take the test for y’all.”

Eva replied coldly, “We were gonna talk about the details in a little while, but you’re acting all apprehensive and stuff. One of your best friends and your sister need help.”

“Smoothies and sandwiches,” Hallie came in and said, holding the delicious offerings. “Come try some, Eva. Leave your sister alone. Let’s eat.”

“Stay out of this, Hallie. I’m talking to Ella,” Eva huffed back.

“Wait, what’s going on in here?” Charli said, clearly not liking Eva’s tone.

“We’re trying not to get kicked out of the mansion,” Hallie joked.

“Settle down everybody. This is slumber party time. Ella, what’s going on?” Charli asked me.

“I’m talking to her,” Eva said, and she stepped in front of Charli. “That’s what’s going

on. If you give us some space and get out of our business, we can finish.”

“Eva, I’m not talking to you. I’m asking Ella,” Charli responded. She seemed to be the only one out of the five of us who could stand up to my sister.

“Okay, I’ll tell you,” Randal cut in to avoid a standoff.

“Hush, girl,” Eva snapped. Then she gave Randal a little push.

My sister’s rude actions were a red flag to me. If Eva did not want to tell her plan to Hallie and Charli, then my apprehensions were right on. If it was no big deal, then what was the big deal in telling them?

“They just want me to help them with the test,” I said, wanting Eva to put her claws away.

“What’s the big deal in that?” Hallie said. “We all need to study. First quarter exams are here. We can help each other.”

Eva and Randal were silent. I looked at my sister like, *Are you going to tell her, or do I need to?* Thinking Randal was going to step out of her shy box and take ownership of what she wanted me to do was a joke.

“Not that it’s any of y’all’s business,” Eva finally said to them when she saw that they were not going to leave well enough alone. “Randal and I need her to help us with US History, and not just studying. Heck, it’s too late to get the stuff down now. We have a little plan for her to help us. She’s got the class before us. She’s going to fill out two copies of her answer sheet and leave one behind for us to find when we come into class after her.”

“Huh? You want her to cheat? Oh heck nah. Stupid plan. It ain’t happening,” Charli uttered.

“She is not your sister. You can’t tell her what to do. Dang, you think you can boss everyone around,” Eva said to our hostess. “She’s my sister and I need her. What I don’t need is y’all clouding up her mind with this guilty-conscience junk that helping me is wrong.”

Eva truly thought her comments were righteous. Charli did not even look at her to cosign. Instead Charli looked at me, pulled me over to a corner, and called Hallie over to us.

Charli said, “Don’t let anybody make you feel like if you don’t help them do something horrible that it’s your fault if they fail. You have

too much to lose, and you're much too sweet of a person to fall for intimidation. Tell her, Hallie."

Hallie said, "Ella, you know your sister. She wants what she wants, but everything she wants isn't good for her. That's why we're friends. That's why we're sisters: to help keep each other in line so we won't fall for the okey doke."

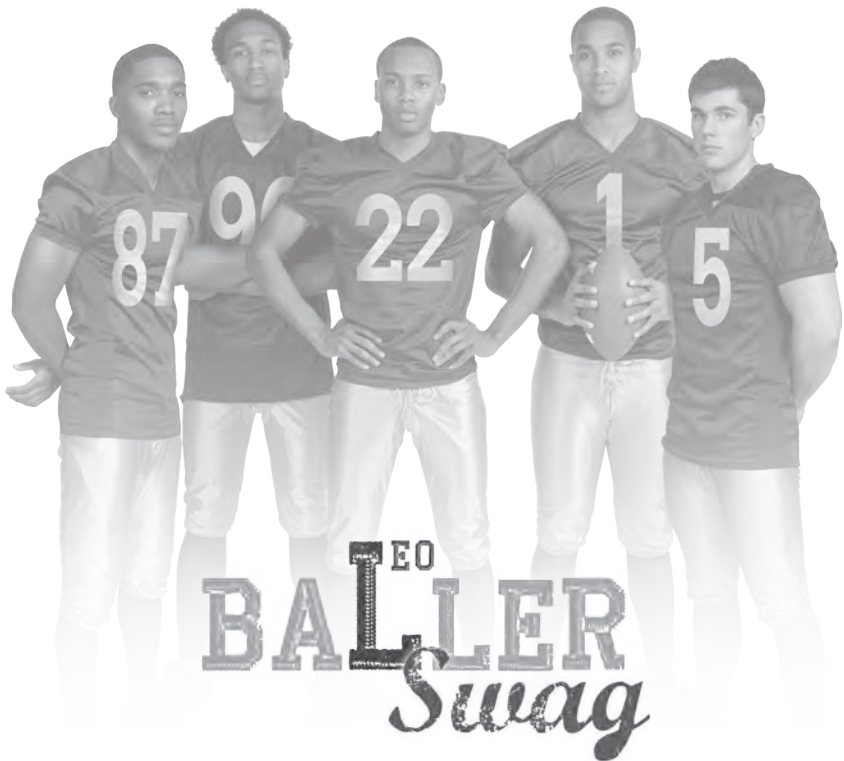
The slumber party we were supposed to be having was completely shot. Hallie and Charli were balled up together, talking about their guys. Eva and Randal were cornered, hoping and praying I would go against my better judgment and help them. I was stuck in between, pretending like I was asleep so that no one would bother me. All the while, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. What was right and what could I not forgive myself for if I did not do it?

"Get up everybody. Time to go win our first competition," Charli said Saturday morning as if all hearts and minds were clear.

We were going to a meet in Loganville, Georgia. It was about forty-five minutes away, and there were four teams scheduled to compete



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Leo Steele is the toughest
thug in school—and football is his life.
But when life gets tough, will football win?



*Stephanie Perry Moore
& Derrick Moore*



CHAPTER 1

Move On

Lions we're 3-0," Coach Strong said to us in the locker room after the football game. "And I'm so proud of each and every one of you. You've been digging deep. You've been stepping up. Individually, you've been covering your assignments. And collectively, we've been stellar. I'm proud of your effort."

"So, Coach, do we get tomorrow off? No film, right?" Waxton, our star running back yelled out.

"We wanna make it 4-0, don't we?" Coach yelled back. "I'll see you all tomorrow at eleven. Head on out to the buses so we can get back to the school. Steele, I need to see you real quick."

"Yes, sir, Coach," I said immediately, going to see the man I admired.

I had no clue what Coach wanted from me. I had a pretty good game. Two sacks, a forced fumble, six tackles, two for a loss, and seven assists. Heck, he should have been giving me the defensive player of the game award. I would have thought there was something positive he wanted to talk to me about, except the way he called my name with irritation let me know he was not pleased with Leo Steele.

“You wanted to see me, Coach?” I asked.

“You played a tremendous game tonight, son.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“But I got a problem.”

“Yeah, Coach?”

“I’ve been checking in with all the teachers, asking them to let me know if any of my players are failing. Right now you are failing math and history. Boy, what are you doing? Sleeping in class?” he lectured. “Midterms are coming up. Unless you want to be sitting on the sidelines and cheering like the girls with pom-poms, you’d better get it together. Am I making myself clear? If you need a tutor, open your mouth. No, no, I take that back. There’s gonna be mandatory

tutoring for the next couple of Saturdays in the school library. You be there.”

Not wanting to go, I asked, “Tomorrow? We got practice, Coach.”

“We’re watching film at eleven. Tutoring is at ten. Go there for an hour and then come on to practice. I just don’t get it with you, Steele. You’re one of my most aggressive players. You go get it on the field. You know what you want to do, and you handle your business. Aren’t you trying to play D1 ball?”

“Yes, sir, Coach.”

“Well, they don’t take idiots. So if that’s your goal, if that’s what you’re trying to do, then I suggest you get on your work. It’s like when you double team. You get down low, and you put more into it and make sure you quickly get off your blocks. If the subject is hard, then you got to put more into it as well. No excuses. If the grades don’t come up, you’re off the team.”

On the bus ride back to Lockwood High School, my teammates were fired up. Inwardly, I, too, was excited we were 3–0. We knew we had a great team. We were good on offense and

defense. However, since I got lectured, I was not as excited as they were. How was I going to get *me* together? Being taken out of the starting line—that was not an option.

“So you gonna hang out with us or what, man?” Landon asked when we got back to his car in the school parking lot.

“Nah, dude, just take me home.”

“Why? There are a couple of sets we need to fly by.”

“Man, I need to go study.”

“On a Friday night, Leo, really? You’re talking to me.”

“Coach just told me if I don’t handle my business, I am going to be watching y’all play. So, uh, take me home.”

“Dang, I didn’t know it was like that. Let me get you there quick. We need you on defense.”

On the ride to my place, it was a little quiet in Landon’s car. For a preacher’s kid, he tried hard to be a bad boy. He’d have his music blaring, and it was not gospel. It was hardcore nasty rap, but now the music was off.

“What’s up with you, man? I haven’t seen Pastor King at any of the games.”

“I know, right? He says he’s my number-one fan, and he wants me to get out there and do my thing. Yet every Friday night, he’s out of town speaking somewhere trying to save some soul but forgetting about his own son. You know what I’m saying?” Landon disdained.

Finally, we reached my apartment and I got out. “Man, just talk to him. Go home tonight.”

Landon’s dad was not the only parent who had not come to our games this year. My mom was absent as well. Ever since she found the wrong dude to whisper the right things in her ear over the summer, she had been wanting to be with him more than me. When I opened the front door and walked inside, I did not know how interested in him she was until I saw both of them there packing everything.

“Mom, what’s going on?” I hollered.

“Calm down, Leo, let me explain,” she said, rising from wrapping glass in newspaper.

I asked, “What are you guys doing? Tell me we’re not moving in with him.”

“Leo, this is my boyfriend, Frankie. Well, he’s wanted to meet you lots of times, but with your football schedule it’s just been impossible.”

Frankie stuck out his hand trying to impress my mom, but I would not shake it. I looked at it as if it had cyanide on it. I felt if I touched it, my hand would dissolve away or something. I mean, here was this man helping my mom pack up our place, and I didn't know anything about it.

"Mom, what's going on?"

She said, "The little job I have here is not going to advance me forward. Frankie feels—"

Cutting her off, I huffed, "Frankie feels? Who cares what *he* feels?"

Frankie stepped to me and said, "Hey, watch your mouth with your mom, son."

"I'm not your son," I scoffed.

My dad died when I was in elementary school. I was actually with him. We were in a bad car accident, and he did not make it. At the time, I did not know much about adult things. I kept hearing my mom cry at night, saying she did not know how we were going to make it. I always respected the fact that she did not get with any old joker to help her pay bills. So now I was surprised this Frankie guy had influence over her.

"Leo, calm down and step back."

The little shrimp my mom was with might have thought he was tough, but I could take him. I was six three and a half, two hundred twenty-five pounds. He looked to be about five eight, one sixty-five tops. I could snap him.

“Mom, I’m not moving in with this guy. Where does he live anyway? I gotta stay in this school zone so that I can play for the Lions. We’re going to win state.”

“Y’all have only won three games. I think it’s pretty premature of you to talk about how y’all gonna win state,” Frankie offered.

“Come on, this is insulting,” I said to my mom. I’ll bet that jerk probably wished he played back in the day. I completely ignored him.

Frankie got in my mom’s face. “He is not coming with me. No way. I’m not taking care of any grown man. No way.”

“Frankie, let me talk to him,” my mom said, trying to calm the guy down.

“Mom, what is he talking about? You can’t go somewhere without me.”

The look on Frankie’s face spoke volumes. The sly way he held his lips and the chuckle he had in his voice told me I was wrong. My mom

was planning to move in with some man she had not even known for six months and leave her son. I looked at her like, *You gotta explain this.*

Her eyes were watering as she said, “Okay, I know you probably think this doesn’t make a lot of sense, but I just need a fresh start. I need to get away, and you’re eighteen. You have so much invested here. I’m going to move to New York with Frankie. I’m going to be able to send some money back to you. I just got to get away, Leo. You’ll be okay.”

I shook my head and walked down the hall to my room and slammed the door. My bed was gone. I did not understand this, but with the long away game, an equally long ride home, tough talk with the coach, and now finding out that my world was turning upside down, I didn’t care. I was exhausted. I curled up on the floor. My plan was to deal with all of this the next day.

Coach was going over film in the team meeting. I was so glad that I had a good game the night before because whatever he was saying was going in one ear and coming out the other. It was not that I was not trying to figure out how

I could be better because I did miss a couple of assignments. However, I took his criticism like a man; but honestly, I had bigger fish to contend with. At the moment I was drowning in uncertainty and letting the worry get the best of me. How was I going to take care of myself? Yeah, I heard my mom talk a good game about sending some money back to me. However, our apartment was \$650 a month. While the government paid for half of that, I could not even afford \$325.

“Steele, are you listening?” Coach Strong called me out.

“Yes, sir.”

He asked, “What’d I just say, man?”

And the whole team laughed at me because I could not repeat his critique. Coach Grey was a sweet older gentleman and our defensive coordinator. Though he was a white dude, he could keep the brothers in line. When Coach Grey called me out of the team meeting, I immediately went into defense mode.

“I’m sorry, Coach, I just got a lot on my mind. I know it seemed like I was asleep, like I wasn’t paying attention. I was in it. You know I wanna get better.”